

Functional Neuroanatomy

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With 208 Figures

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Chapter 1

Electron Microscopy of Golgi-Impregnated Neurons

WILLI A. RIBI. With 7 Figures

I.	Introduction	1
II.	General Description of the Procedure	3
III.	Results	10
IV.	Discussion	14
V.	Appendix: Schedules	15

Chapter 2

Block Intensification and X-Ray Microanalysis of Cobalt-Filled Neurons for Electron Microscopy

URSULA K. BASSEMER and NICHOLAS J. STRAUSFELD. With 10 Figures

I.	Introduction	19
II.	Method	20
III.	Ultrastructure	28
IV.	Identification of Size and Nature of Precipitate	37
V.	Discussion	37
VI.	Applications	42

Chapter 3

Horseradish Peroxidase and Other Heme Proteins as Neuronal Markers

DICK R. NÄSSEL. With 26 Figures

I.	Introduction	44
II.	The Versatility of Exogenous Heme Proteins as Neuronal Markers	45
III.	Chemistry of Peroxidase-Active Proteins and Reactions for their Demonstration	46
IV.	Methods	51

V.	Cytology of Peroxidase-Labelled Neurons	78
VI.	Mechanisms of Neuronal Uptake and Transport of Heme Proteins	85
VII.	Concluding Remarks	88
VIII.	Addendum	89
IX.	Appendix 1: Method	90
X.	Appendix 2: Solutions	91

Chapter 4

Intracellular Staining with Nickel Chloride

FRED DELCOMYN. With 1 Figure

I.	Introduction	92
II.	Method	93

Chapter 5

Rubeanic Acid and X-Ray Microanalysis for Demonstrating Metal Ions in Filled Neurons

CAROLE M. HACKNEY and JENNIFER S. ALTMAN. With 5 Figures

I.	Introduction	96
II.	Use of Different Metal Ions	96
III.	Rubeanic Acid Development	98
IV.	Applications of Rubeanic Acid Development	100
V.	X-Ray Microanalysis for Detection of Metal Ions	105
VI.	Conclusion	111

Chapter 6

Double Marking for Light and Electron Microscopy

HARJIT SINGH SEYAN, URSULA K. BASSEMIR and NICHOLAS J. STRAUSFELD.
With 9 Figures

I.	Introduction	112
II.	Double Marking for Light Microscopy	113
III.	Double Marking for Light and Electron Microscopy	117
IV.	Alternative Strategies	128

Chapter 7

Lucifer Yellow Histology

NICHOLAS J. STRAUSFELD, HARJIT SINGH SEYAN, DAVID WOHLERS
and JONATHAN P. BACON. With 10 Figures

I.	Introduction	132
II.	Filling from Electrodes	134
III.	Passive Back- or Forwardfilling	135

IV. Fixing	135
V. Buffers, Ringers	137
VI. Whole-Mount Viewing	138
VII. Embedding and Sectioning	141
VIII. Microscopy	143
IX. Photography	145
X. Fading	149
XI. Reconstructions	151
XII. Geography	151
XIII. Storage	151
XIV. Artefacts	154
XV. Conclusions	155

Chapter 8

Portraying the Third Dimension in Neuroanatomy

PETER T. SPECK and NICHOLAS J. STRAUSFELD. With 22 Figures

I. Introduction	156
II. Why Computer Graphics in Neuroanatomy?	156
III. Designing the System	157
IV. The NEU System	159
V. Alignment of Sections	161
VI. Interactive Profile Acquisition	163
VII. Noninteractive Operations	167
VIII. Final Remarks	177

Chapter 9

Three-Dimensional Reconstruction and Stereoscopic Display of Neurons in the Fly Visual System

ROLAND HENGSTENBERG, HEINRICH BÜLTHOFF and
BÄRBEL HENGSTENBERG. With 12 Figures

I. Introduction	183
II. Procedure	183
III. Hardware Configuration	185
IV. The Data Acquisition Program HISDIG	185
V. The Reproduction Program HISTRA	188
VI. Stereoscopic Vision	188
VII. Examples of Displays and Stereopairs	190
VIII. Further Applications	203
IX. Concluding Remarks	205

Chapter 10

Laser Microsurgery for the Study of Behaviour and Neural Development of Flies

GAD GEIGER, DICK R. NÄSSEL and HARJIT SINGH SEYAN. With 14 Figures

I.	Introduction	206
II.	The Laser Microbeam Unit	207
III.	Procedure of Laser Surgery	210
IV.	Histological Analysis	215
V.	Anatomical-Behavioural Correlations of Laser-Eliminated Lobula Plate Neurons	219
VI.	Aspects of Neuronal Development	220
VII.	Discussion	224

Chapter 11

Anatomical Localization of Functional Activity in Flies Using**³H-2-Deoxy-D-Glucose**

ERICH BUCHNER and SIGRID BUCHNER. With 6 Figures

I.	Introduction	225
II.	Essentials of the Technique	227
III.	Results	230
IV.	Concluding Remarks	237

Chapter 12

Strategies for the Identification of Amine- and Peptide-Containing Neurons

MICHAEL E. ADAMS, CYNTHIA A. BISHOP and MICHAEL O'SHEA.

With 3 Figures

I.	Introduction	239
II.	Neutral Red: A Nonspecific Stain for Amine-Containing Neurons	239
III.	Neutral Red: An Indicator of Peptidergic Neurons	241
IV.	Permanent Preparations of Vital Staining with Neutral Red	242
V.	Use of Immunohistochemical Approaches to Neuron Identification	243
VI.	Immunohistochemical Screening: Whole-Mount Method	243
VII.	Identification: Immunohistochemistry and Dye Injection	245
VIII.	Confirmation of Immunohistochemistry: Cell Isolation, Extraction and Assay	247
IX.	Concluding Remarks	248

Chapter 13

Immunochemical Identification of Vertebrate-Type Brain-Gut Peptides in Insect Nerve Cells

HANNE DUVE and ALAN THORPE. With 10 Figures

I.	Introduction	250
II.	Immunocytochemistry: Basic Principles	251
III.	Techniques of Immunocytochemistry	252
IV.	Problems of Specificity	255
V.	Brain-Gut Peptides in Insects	259
VI.	Extraction and Purification	259
VII.	Conclusions	264
VIII.	Appendix 1: Immunofluorescence: The Indirect Method	265
IX.	Appendix 2: Immunoperoxidase: The PAP Method	266

Chapter 14

Immunocytochemical Techniques for the Identification of Peptidergic Neurons

MANFRED ECKERT and JOACHIM UDE. With 31 Figures

I.	Introduction and Survey	267
II.	Preparation of Antigens	271
III.	Production and Isolation of Antibodies	275
IV.	Absorption of the Antisera Before Use for Immunocytochemistry.	277
V.	Isolation of Hapten-Specific Antibodies	278
VI.	Methods for Antibody Isolation	278
VII.	Immunocytochemical Techniques	281
VIII.	Immunocytochemical Staining Methods	288
IX.	CoCl ₂ -Iontophoresis and Indirect Immunofluorescence Method	292
X.	Supplementary Methods	292
XI.	Electron Microscopy	293
XII.	Conclusions	301

Chapter 15

Detection of Serotonin-Containing Neurons in the Insect Nervous System by Antibodies to 5-HT

NIKOLAI KLEMM. With 8 Figures

I.	Introduction	302
II.	General Considerations of Antibody Staining	303
III.	The Immunofluorescence Technique	304
IV.	Fluorescence Microscopy and Photography	310
V.	The Unlabelled Antibody Enzyme Method for Sections	311
VI.	A Whole-Mount Method for Antibody Staining	313
VII.	Specificity of Anti-5-HT Labelling	315

Chapter 16

**Monoaminergic Innervation in a Hemipteran Nervous System:
A Whole-Mount Histofluorescence Survey**

THOMAS R. J. FLANAGAN. With 10 Figures

I.	Introduction	317
II.	Materials and Methods	317
III.	Results	320
IV.	Discussion	329

Chapter 17

**Identification of Neurons Containing Vertebrate-Type
Brain-Gut Peptides by Antibody and Cobalt Labelling**

HANNE DIJVE, ALAN THORPE and NICHOLAS J. STRAUSFELD.

With 3 Figures

I.	Introduction	331
II.	Method	333
III.	Interpretation of the Results	336
IV.	Conclusions	338

Chapter 18

Interpretation of Freeze-Fracture Replicas of Insect Nervous Tissue

STANLEY D. CARLSON, RICHARD L. SAINT MARIE and CHE CHI.

With 15 Figures

I.	Introduction	339
II.	Procedure	342
III.	Interpretation of Replicas	350
IV.	The Cleaved Cell: A Survey	351
V.	Recent Advances and Future Prospects	374

Chapter 19

High-Voltage Electron Microscopy for Insect Neuroanatomy

CHE CHI. With 6 Figures

I.	Introduction	376
II.	Rationale for HVEM for Biological Research	377
III.	Method	379
IV.	HVEM of Insect Neurons	380

References	386
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Subject Index	420
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Electron Microscopy of Golgi-Impregnated Neurons

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Introduction

This chapter will describe and discuss a combined Golgi-electron microscopy (EM) technique that successfully preserves gross morphology and ultrastructure, especially the synaptology, of identified neurons. In addition, various combinations of fixation, chromation and impregnation useful for insect and vertebrate nervous tissue are described. The Appendix lists schedules for fixation and chromation, giving impregnation times.

The most pleasant experience for a neuroanatomist is to know that certain profiles seen in the EM belong to a neuron already seen in the light microscope (LM), particularly in the case of intricate cells whose perikarya and largest processes only are identifiable in thin sections. The present Golgi-EM modification permits synaptic and morphometric analysis of all parts of a nerve cell.

Golgi-stained neurons have been observed in LM and EM by many investigators working on vertebrates (Stell 1964; Blackstad 1965), and insects (Trujillo-Cenóz and Melamed 1970; Strausfeld 1973; Strausfeld and Campos-Ortega 1973; Campos-Ortega and Strausfeld 1973; Ribi 1975), all of whom devised methods for re-embedding Golgi-stained neurons. Other examples of Golgi-EM studies are: Kolb (1970), LeVay (1973), Pinching and Brooke (1973), West (1976), Parnavelas et al. (1977), Peters and Fairén (1978), Peters et al. (1979) and Fairén and Valverde (1980).

Ideal sections containing neurons of special interest, impregnated against a clear background, were removed for EM examination before the embedding medium (usually Permount) had set. The sections were washed in xylene and re-embedded in araldite for ultrathin sectioning. Additional contrast was rarely (or sparingly) applied, since aqueous treatment risks removing the silver chromate precipitate that fills impregnated cells. It is not surprising that the general quality of ultrathin sections has not been satisfactory. In particular, tissue was poorly preserved after rough and unphysiological treatment and suitable only for LM. The omission of OsO_4 , uranyl ace-

tate and lead citrate was generally disadvantageous, so that a specific modification of existing Golgi-EM techniques was called for.

The development of aldehyde-based fixatives with physiologic osmolarities and ionic concentrations has refined the method so as to allow combined LM and EM examination of impregnated neurons in the context of their immediate surroundings of unimpregnated neighbours.

Attempts have also been made, especially by vertebrate neuroanatomists, to preserve the cytological details of the impregnated neurons by de-impregnation of normal Golgi-stained tissue prior to embedding for EM. Blackstad (1970) used either sodium sulfite or ammonium nitrate to remove silver chromate deposits, while Ramón-Moliner and Ferrari (1972) substituted silver chromate by lead nitrate. More recently, Ramón-Moliner and Ferrari (1976) have improved their procedure by using lead lactate to produce lead chromate. The initial results were not encouraging, as the preservation of the tissue was poor and the substitution difficult to control.

Another method proposed by Blackstad (1975a, b) consisted of reducing silver chromate to metallic silver by putting thick sections (20–30 μm) containing silver-impregnated cells in glycerol and exposing them to UV-irradiation. Afterwards excess silver chromate was removed with sodium thiosulfate. Only scattered silver particles remained in the neuron originally impregnated with silver chromate. Apart from being difficult to control, the usefulness of this method is limited: sections thicker than 30 μm limit penetration of UV-irradiation.

Fairén et al. (1977) successfully substituted part of the silver chromate deposit with metallic gold prior to removing the remaining silver chromate with sodium thiosulfate. This technique leaves only a minimum amount of gold deposit in the previously impregnated structures. The fine structure of the impregnated fibre is well-preserved, allowing recognition of synapses in the impregnated neuron.

To overcome the complexity of de-impregnation and substitution methods, a sparser precipitation can be obtained using short impregnation times (Scott and Guillery 1974).

The procedure described here is a Golgi-EM technique initially employed for insects (Ribi 1976a) and modified for vertebrate nervous tissue (Ribi and Berg 1980). In this method, silver chromate precipitation is stopped before the cell processes are completely filled, resulting in an incomplete impregnation. This can be achieved by weak chromate and silver solutions and shorter impregnation times, providing a simple, rapid, and reliable Golgi-EM method. Impregnated neurons can be studied in thick sections: they have improved preservation of ultrastructure and are easier to thin-section.

General Description of the Procedure

Insects.

Golgi-EM investigations were carried out on the optic lobes of bees and flies. Insects were immobilized by cooling to 4 °C for a few minutes before the head capsules were opened to allow the fixative to directly contact the brains. Opening certain parts of the head capsule helps local impregnation. Removing the cornea results in impregnated neurons in the first optic neuropil. Removing ommatidia results in impregnated neurons in the first to third optic neuropils and in the midbrain. To resolve neurons extending from the head to the body, openings are made ventrally in the thorax to allow diffusion of silver nitrate (Strausfeld 1980).

Vertebrates

Golgi-EM investigations were mainly carried out on the cerebellar and cerebral cortex of mice and rats. Animals, aged 4 to 5 months, were anaesthetized by intraperitoneal injection of 35% chloral hydrate at a dosage of 0.1 ml/100 g body weight (Palay and Chan-Palay 1974), artificially respired with 95% oxygen and 5% carbon dioxide, and then perfused through the aorta using a two-step aldehyde solution [in 0.12 M phosphate buffer with 0.02 mM CaCl_2 (pH 7.35) at 20 °C as recommended by Palay and Chan-Palay (1974)]. Initially 150 ml (1% formaldehyde, 1.25% glutaraldehyde) was used for each animal. After perfusion the heads were removed and stored overnight at 4 °C in a fresh perfusion solution.

The following day the brains were removed from the skulls and divided into pieces not larger than 125 mm³ and rinsed in three changes of buffer before further treatment.

Fixation

In general, any aldehyde fixation suitable for EM can be used before chromation. The use of aldehyde fixative combined with phosphate buffer (Milanig 1961) gives good results on the above-mentioned species. Modifications of fixatives and buffers may favour impregnation of certain brain areas in different species (see Appendix).

Chromation and silver impregnation can be carried out in the dark or light without noticeable differences in quality of impregnation. Insect and vertebrate nervous tissue shown here was, however, processed in the dark at 4 °C.

The fixation time depends mainly on the tissue size and temperature. Insects the size of *Drosophila* are fixed for at least 3–4 h at 4 °C, whereas after

perfusion vertebrate tissue was left in the final fixative overnight at 4 °C. The pH of the fixative is less critical than is its osmolarity, which should be physiologically appropriate. Fixatives were buffered to a pH value of between 7.2 and 7.4. Tissue was later washed in several changes of buffer to remove excess fixative and then stored in buffer at room temperature prior to osmication and chromation.

Osmication and Chromation

Since osmium tetroxide penetrates slowly, only a small zone of tissue near the surface will be secondarily fixed unless tissue is cut into small pieces. The normal concentration is 1%–2% aqueous or buffered OsO_4 . Fixation is for 1–2 h, depending on the volume of the tissue. The duration and concentration of chromation can, however, be varied between 2 and 5 days without resulting in ultrastructural change or differences in the quality of silver impregnation.

Four different procedures gave equally good results:

1. Chromation is incorporated into initial fixation.
2. Chromation follows initial fixation, preceding osmication.
3. Fixation is followed by OsO_4 before chromation.
4. Chromation is incorporated with osmication (the "Golgi-rapid" method).

The following describes the third procedure. Chromation for 2–12 h (at 4 °C) in 1% $\text{K}_2\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_7$ solution (buffered or unbuffered) follows osmication (buffered 2% OsO_4). Tissue is then rinsed in phosphate buffer and, finally, rinsed in double-distilled water. Prolonged chromation does not increase silver impregnation (Strausfeld 1980).

Silver Impregnation

Following chromation, tissue is briefly rinsed in distilled water and then transferred through several changes of 0.5% silver nitrate until there is no precipitate from the tissue surface. To obtain incomplete impregnation, the immersion time is short and the silver concentration low.

Silver impregnation in 0.5% AgNO_3 (pH 6.9) is at 4 °C for 0.5 h to (maximally) 4 h in the dark. The tissue blocks were lightly agitated approximately every 15 min to facilitate access of the solution to all sides of the tissue.

After silver impregnation the tissue is washed several times in double-distilled water, dehydrated through ethanols, from 30% to absolute, and washed twice in propylene oxide and finally embedded in epoxy resin in the usual way for routine EM.

Thick Sectioning

The purpose of a planned Golgi-EM study is to analyse individual neurons, axons or dendrites. In such cases it is essential to first cut 20–80 μm thick sections, since searching for the desired structures by EM would require hundreds of ultrathin sections. Thick sections are inspected in the LM before re-embedding and proceeding further for EM.

The Golgi-EM technique uses a mixture of "soft araldite" as the embedding medium. This allows easy cutting of up to 100- μm -thick sections. In the early days of Golgi-EM, thick sections were first mounted in Permout between glass slide and coverslip. Removing a suitable section meant immersing the whole slide in xylene to dissolve the Permout. This procedure (contact between araldite, Permout and xylene) changed the cutting quality of the resin, making ultrathin sectioning difficult.

The following technique considers both requirements: easy handling and cutting of thick, semithin and ultrathin sections. Hard plastic sections (normal EM epoxy mixture) 20–80 μm thick are cut on a sliding microtome equipped with a heavy steel knife or with sturdy razor blades (Schick Injector blades) mounted in a special holder (Jung). The block face is softened during sectioning by illuminating it with an infrared lamp (Philips IR 230–250 V/250 W). Alternatively, a small soldering iron mounted a few millimeters in front of the block face can be used to warm up its surface. The correct degree of softening can be regulated by the cutting speed, or the distance and temperature of the soldering iron or IR bulb.

Instead of thick sections being mounted under Permout between glass slide and coverslip, they are placed in liquid resin between acetate sheets. The advantage of this is that single sections can easily be cut out and stripped of acetate foil without damaging the tissue, or loosening neighbouring sections (Ribi 1978). The cutting quality of the section also remains stable. Thick sections are mounted as follows:

A piece of 0.1-mm-thick acetate foil is attached to a glass slide with double-sided Scotch tape. Thick sections are glued in rows on the acetate foil with a little resin. To flatten the sections the slide is placed on a hot plate (60 °C) for a few minutes. A second piece of acetate foil is then put on the top of the sections. Another glass slide is then weighted down on top of it. After 48 h polymerization of 60 °C the top slide is removed and the top acetate foil peeled off from the sections (Fig. 1).

Re-embedding

Thick sections mounted on the lower acetate sheet are examined under the LM, and appropriately impregnated cells photographed, dissected out with a microscalpel, and remounted in a flat silicon mould (Fig. 1) for an ultrathin cross- or longitudinal-section series.

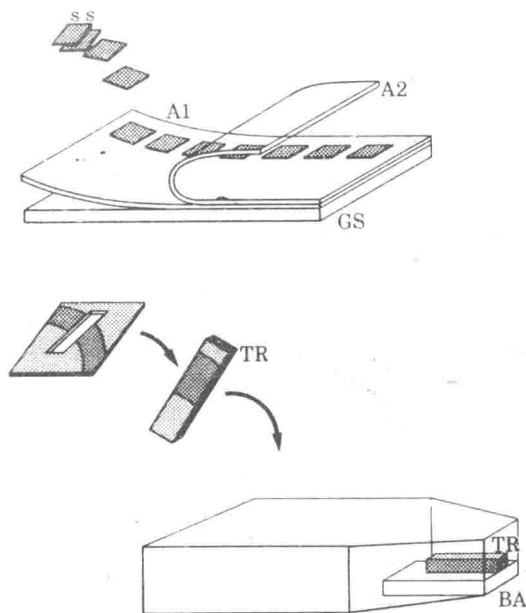


Fig. 1. Re-embedding procedure. 25–80 μm thick sections (*S*) are mounted with a drop of araldite between two sheets of a 0.1 mm thick acetate foil (*A1* and *A2*) on a glass slide *GS*. After polymerization in the oven for 24 h at 60 $^{\circ}\text{C}$ the top acetate foil (*A2*) can be removed. Sections containing neurons of interest are dissected out and the target neuron (*TR*) re-embedded in a flat silicon mould. Small pieces of hardened araldite (*BA*) are first put beneath the section to prevent it from tilting or sinking

Semithin Sectioning

The conventional technique of cutting, staining and examining semithin sections (0.5–2 μm thick) is used on Golgi-EM material to control trimming and to aid orientation before making ultrathin sections.

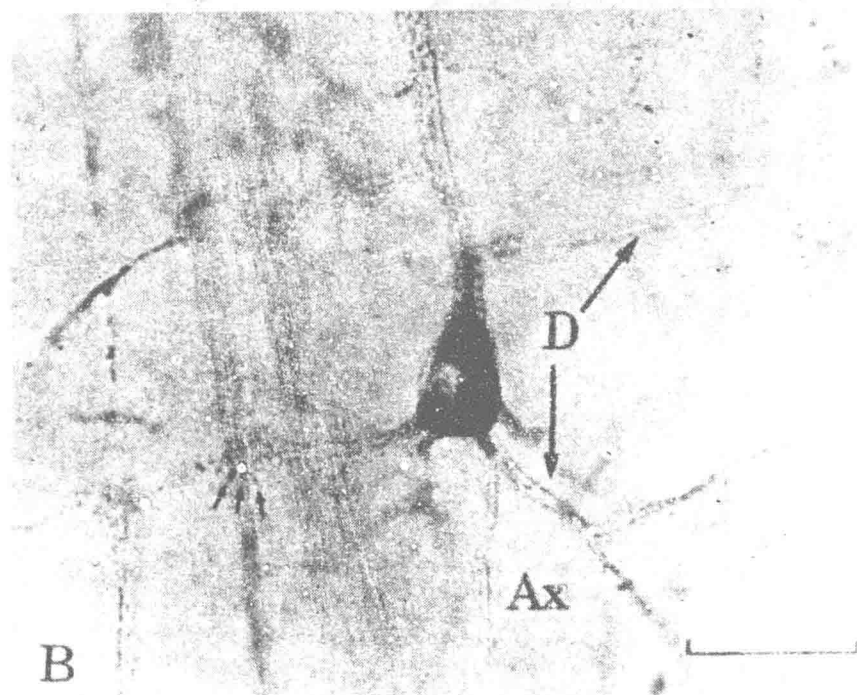
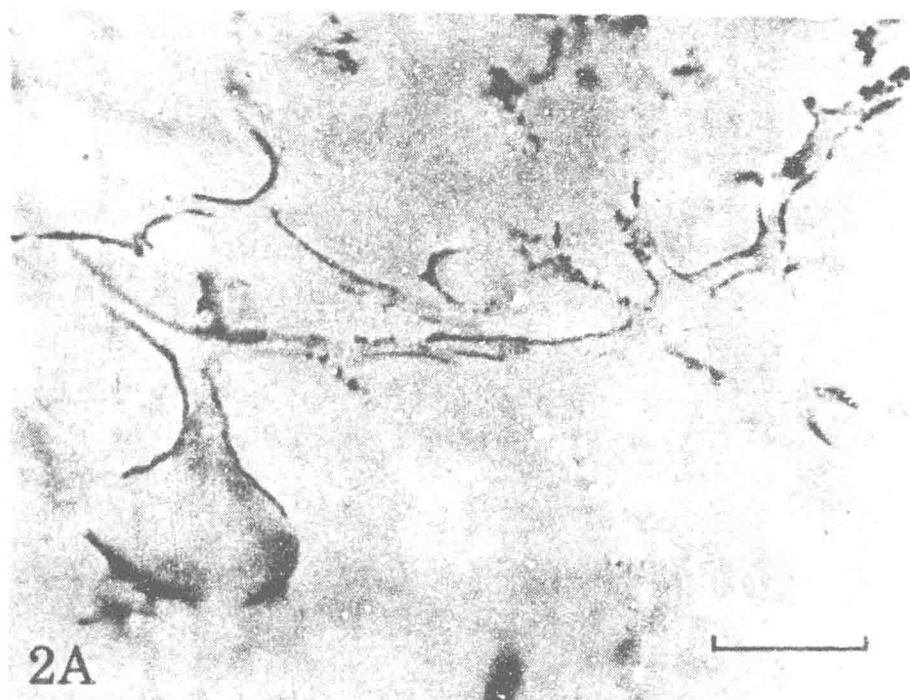
Semithin sections are stained with 1% toluidine blue in 1% borax. Mounting sections in high viscosity immersion oil under a coverslip prevents rapid bleaching.

Ultrathin Sectioning

Trimming and ultramicrotomy of Golgi-EM treated material is carried out conventionally after the block face has been trimmed as much as possible to minimize the search area.

Ultrathin sections are collected on slot grids, coated with 0.25% Formvar and stained for 30 min with a saturated uranyl acetate solution made up in methanol. They are then stained by a modified lead citrate procedure (Venable and Coggeshall 1965) for 20 min.

Fig. 2. **A** A Purkinje cell of the mouse cerebellum showing the entire inner membrane ensheathed by a thin layer of precipitate. Even small dendritic spines (*small arrows*) contain the precipitate. **B** Pyramidal cell of the mouse cortex. Dendrites with numerous spines and the single axon are lightly impregnated. The cell body appears darker. *Small arrows* indicate dendritic spines. *Ax* axon; *D* dendrite. Bars **A**, **B** = 20 μm



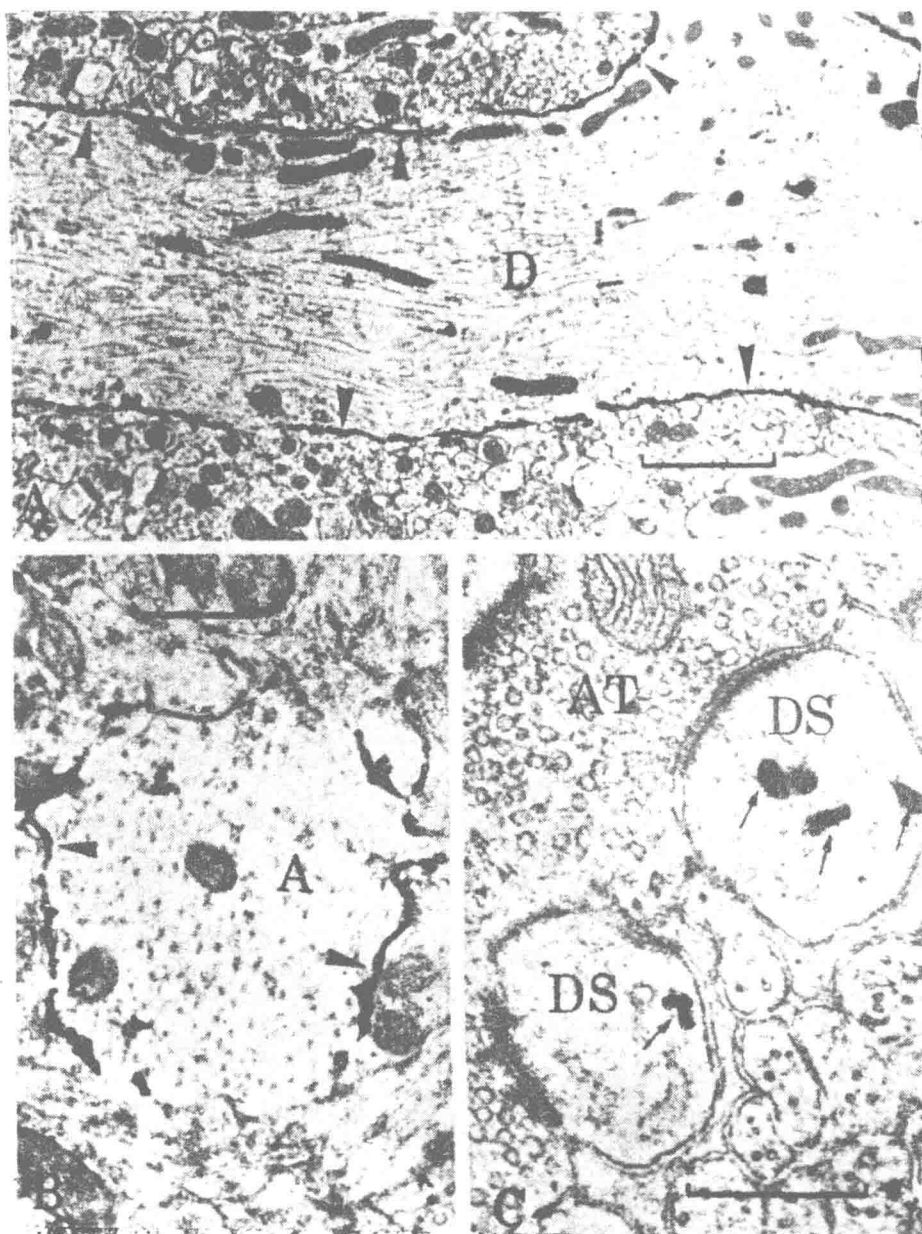


Fig. 3. **A** Longitudinal section of a dendritic branch of a Purkinje cell delineated by fine silver chromate precipitates along the cell membrane. *D* dendrite; *arrowheads* silver precipitate. **B** Cross section through an axonal (*A*) branch of a pyramidal cell. Like the dendrites of cerebellar neurons, the cortical pyramidal cells are delineated by a fine silver precipitate (*arrowhead*). **C** Two dendritic spines in cross section with silver chromate particles located on the spine apparatus (*arrows*). Pre- and postsynaptic sites are well-preserved. *AT* axon terminal; *DS* dendritic spine. Bar **A** = 2 μ m. **B**, **C** = 0.5 μ m